

## BEST PRACTICES



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# Best Practices for Facilitating Difficult Dialogues in the Basic Communication Course

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**Abstract:** Effective facilitation of classroom dialogue can stimulate open discussion and debate, challenge students to consider diverse perspectives, and promote critical student reflection and growth. Unfortunately, some instructors may be hesitant to approach controversial topics, for fear of losing face or risking chaos in the classroom. By learning and practicing established facilitation techniques, teachers can develop confidence and competence in harnessing the pedagogical power of difficult dialogue while maintaining classroom cohesion and community. This article provides 10 best practices for facilitating difficult classroom dialogues. These practices equip instructors with resources for building community, maintaining classroom immediacy, and grappling with disagreements without destroying relationships and classroom climate.

Heated controversies surrounding issues of immigration, race, social class, ability, violence, sexuality, and gender inclusion touch most college campuses. Communication courses provide a unique, yet potentially challenging opportunity to use curricular goals as a backdrop for healthy and inclusive discussions of these complex topics. Some instructors, however, may have concerns regarding the difficulty of maintaining productive and respectful dialogue on these issues, or worry that such dialogues may have a chilling effect on classroom climate and student investment in a course. Difficult classroom discussions can impact instructor credibility and classroom community, leading some instructors to struggle with questions of how to handle these discussions, when to intervene when a conversation gets too combative, or whether to simply avoid controversial topics altogether. Worse, failure to properly frame and guide a class discussion about identity and difference-related topics can be damaging to students'

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learning (Hurtado, Alvarez, Guillermo-Wann, Cuellar, & Arellano, 2012), academic self-esteem (Nadal, Wong, Griffin, Davidoff, & Sriken, 2014), and even their mental health (Cokley et al., 2017). Therefore, the following 10 best practices are recommended to help instructors mitigate these concerns, and reap the pedagogical benefits of facilitating difficult dialogues in the classroom.

### **Best Practice #1: Set the Stage**

Establish a classroom culture where open dialogue is expected. Instructors should begin laying this framework at the beginning of the semester by clearly stating what they hope students will learn and gain from this course, and inviting students to do the same. Setting clear goals for an open and respectful classroom culture on the first day of class can be instrumental in fostering successful dialogue throughout a course. A course framework that emphasizes clear expectations creates an environment where students can feel safe and confident expressing themselves and listening actively to the expressions of peers. In addition to enhancing students' likelihood of having a productive discussion, clarity promises to foster greater learning (Bolkan, Goodboy, & Myers, 2017).

Instructors can further set the tone for a positive course culture and gain student buy-in by sharing why they love to teach a particular course, and why they think this course material is important. When possible, instructors may share examples of how course material builds on previous knowledge and courses, and how the lessons and skills learned in a course can be applied in students' lives outside of class. Additionally, instructors may lead activities that help students learn each other's names, and a little about one another. Leading relationship-building activities during the first week of a course, along with providing specific directions about how classroom dialogues will be conducted, is paramount in setting the stage for a productive dialogic environment.

### **Best Practice #2: Explain Why Difficult Dialogues Are Needed**

Instructors must talk about why open dialogue matters in a communication course. When teaching the basic communication course, many instructors begin the course by detailing the importance of communication in personal, professional, and civic life and addressing how the process of communication functions. These foundational discussions provide opportunities to connect the importance of difficult dialogues to communication theories, course objectives, and institutional mission statements. Discussions of encoding and decoding, for instance, can make visible how limited experiences and views may inhibit an individual's decoding of messages. By exploring how political, theoretical, ideological, and theological positions all can be deeply rooted in an individual's identity and experiences and affect how individuals (mis)understand social issues and positions, instructors can frame dialogue, particularly difficult dialogues about complex identities and issues, within the goals of the course. This framing may elicit greater student receptivity toward engaging in dialogue about important, and often uncomfortable, topics. For example, instructors may use a video clip that demonstrates a miscommunication due to a lack of dialogue as support for why difficult dialogues are necessary to improve individual and group understanding. Another example is for instructors to provide students with current event articles from two different news sources and ask them to talk through issues using information from both articles. Throughout the discussion, instructors can find teachable moments for highlighting the centrality of difficult dialogues in exposing oneself to divergent viewpoints.

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Some students may question the value of classroom dialogue. Instructors can explain that perspectives may not be easily shifted or persuaded in a single class discussion; however, framing these conversations in learning objectives and institutional mission reifies why dialogue is needed in the course. Instructors should discuss the fears or concerns students might have about open dialogue on difficult issues with regard to particular perspectives and experiences with race, ethnicity, sexuality, gender, social class, religion, and ability. When fears or concerns arise, instructors then can punctuate the purpose of dialogue as it relates and responds to institutional and classroom objectives and outcomes.

### **Best Practice #3: Create Ground Rules**

One method for creating ground rules is for instructors to show a PowerPoint slide that contains a few basic guidelines that the class may consider for conducting productive dialogues. They then can invite students to add their own rules for discussion, print the slide, and have students sign and keep the slide for future class sessions. By posting this document on the course learning management system, students and instructors can refer to it and remind others of the ground rules if and when dialogue violations occur. The University of Michigan's Center for Research on Learning and Teaching (n.d.) offers sample dialogue rules, which include the following:

- ▶ Be aware of how much you are contributing to in-class discussions. Try not to silence yourself out of concern for what others will think about what you say. If you have a tendency to contribute often, give others the opportunity to speak. If you tend to stay quiet, challenge yourself to share ideas so others can learn from you.
- ▶ Listen respectfully. Don't interrupt, engage in private conversations, or turn to technology while others are speaking. Use attentive, courteous body language.
- ▶ Understand that there are different approaches to solving problems. If you are uncertain about someone else's approach, ask a question to explore areas of uncertainty. Listen respectfully to how and why the approach could work.
- ▶ Make an effort to get to know other students. Introduce yourself to students sitting near you. Refer to classmates by name and make eye contact with other students.
- ▶ Keep in mind that we are all still learning and are bound to make mistakes in this setting, as anyone does when approaching a complex task or exploring new ideas. Be open to changing your mind, and make space for others to do so as well (para. 2).

Rules such as these can nurture student confidence to speak as well as to listen to diverse viewpoints. In this way, students not only gain deeper access to their colleagues' knowledge and perspectives, but also they have the opportunity to learn and practice powerful dialogue skills.

### **Best Practice #4: Model Disagreement With Ideas, Not People**

When facilitating dialogues, instructors must teach students to focus on ideas and principles that involve asking questions about why an idea or position is favorable, problematic, or divisive. Students should be reminded not to focus on or attack peers in the classroom, but instead to disagree, deconstruct, and debate ideas. When considering various perspectives on ideas, instructors should ask students to reflect on the potential sources of their attitudes toward political or controversial issues. Additionally, instructors may suggest different situations or scenarios where a particular view might have emerged, and

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question why a belief is held dear by some individuals or communities. Hunter (2016) recommended that instructors ask students to reflect on questions such as the following:

- ▶ Where did this position or idea originate?
- ▶ Was the student raised in a particularly liberal or conservative family?
- ▶ Do they prefer certain news sources over others?
- ▶ Do religious teachings play a role in their views?
- ▶ Is there a time when they changed their position on a social or political issue?
- ▶ Are there people in their social circles who disagree with their positions?
- ▶ Do most people in their life come from similar racial, class, and regional backgrounds?
- ▶ Is an underlying assumption rooted in some form of comparison based on “othering” (e.g., racism, classism, sexism, homophobia, ableism, or nationalism)?

This reflection can spark humane and respectful discussions that address “the varied legitimate ways people view controversial topics” (Hunter, 2016, p. 154) bridging differences among students whose attitudes, values, and opinions may span a spectrum of possibilities. Reflecting on these questions also may help make visible different ways of thinking that are challenging to effective dialogue. Instructors then can model respectful disagreement by emphasizing the vital nature of audience analysis that entails choosing topics, framing ideas, and selecting words and sources that build credibility and resonate positively with a diverse audience. This emphasis allows for relationship maintenance in the face of disagreement and establishes a classroom norm where students are led toward reflection that may help uncover their own biases and privileges and helps them to consider the viability of their classmates’ opposing viewpoints.

## Best Practice #5: Cultivate a Safe Space

It is critical to create a classroom climate where relationships can be repaired if need be. While the terminology of a “safe space” has become maligned and politicized, a logical consequence of “a psychologically unsafe environment [is that it] will prevent students from expressing their thoughts and opinions aloud” (Tofade, Elsner, & Haines, 2013, para. 21). Creating and supporting safe psychological learning spaces is not about protecting a student from difficult discussions; rather, it is about creating a learning environment where such discussions can push the boundaries of heated topics in a way that allows students to balance potentially-conflicting values and competing ideas, while minimizing the risk of causing or triggering trauma. Such values include embracing inclusion and diversity balanced with an appreciation of free speech and a desire for a respectful learning environment. By making such values visible, the ethic of the safe space can serve to protect students from psychologically injuring one another, while speaking their truth. Holley and Steiner (2005) defined a safe space as “a classroom climate that allows students to feel secure enough to take risks, honestly express their views, and share and explore their knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors” (p. 50). The Center for Teaching and Learning at the University of Washington recommends that “[e]stablishing an atmosphere in which students will feel comfortable asking questions and contributing to discussion, in a respectful manner, will increase everyone’s potential for success” (University of Washington, n.d., para. 5).

Two simple rules guide a classroom that invites courageous, productive, and engaged participation: “Oops” and “Ouch.” The Oops and Ouch rule has been used in inclusive pedagogy, and by offices of diversity, equity, and inclusion (see Treveño, n.d.) to promote dialogue spaces where individuals can test and share ideas while having a safety mechanism in place to maintain classroom community and

preserve relationships. Pre-establishing classroom phrases like “yikes,” “oops,” “my bad,” or “foot in mouth” provides a quick and dignity-preserving way for students and instructors to retract a misstated, offensive, or incorrect statement. Conversely, when a classmate feels injured by the words or actions of another student or the instructor, course policies can invite that student to invoke “The Ouch Rule.” The device can be a simple “ouch,” “freeze,” “time-out,” or “hold up” to indicate that an idea or position could be interpreted as harsh or hurtful by classroom peers based on their divergent experiences or beliefs. This rule allows for students to indicate that an offense has occurred and creates an opportunity for the offending student or instructor to gracefully apologize without losing face.

## **Best Practice #6: Inoculate Students Against Potential Trauma**

In many public speaking courses, students are encouraged to pick speech topics about which they are passionate. Often these topics include contemporary political and social issues, such as sexual assault on campus, intimate partner violence, immigration, and hate crimes. These topics provide vital opportunities for dialogue and idea exchange. When engaging in discussions of these topics, however, a balance between student academic growth and personal development is imperative for preserving an engaged and student-centered learning environment. Instructors providing students with “a quick heads up” (Manne, 2015, para. 11) about upcoming speech topics is not only considerate, but can be vital for maintaining a productive learning environment.

Like the term “safe space,” “trigger warnings” have become highly politicized, leading to miscommunication about their meaning and intent. When done well, trigger warnings empower speakers and audience members, encouraging rather than shutting down people and conversations (Ruiz-Mesa, Matos, & Langner, 2017). Trigger warnings are not intended to eliminate uncomfortable or controversial conversations; on the contrary, these few warning words create opportunities for engaged conversation while minimizing risk of student psychological harm. The warning need not be a dramatic declaration. Rather, it can be framed as a casual notification about the topic followed by a brief moment for questions and, ideally, a quick break while a speaker prepares or an instructor makes an announcement about a future class. An alternative way to prepare students for hearing about a potentially traumatic topic is for instructors to write speech topics and speaker order on the board before speeches begin. Therefore, if students feel the need to exit the classroom before a speech begins, they can do so between speeches without feeling stigmatized. Additionally, a simple PowerPoint slide presented at the end of class can remind students of the university’s counseling center services, complete with contact information and hours of operation. Harnessing professorial platforms to recommend such resources can help destigmatize students’ use of campus mental health services.

## **Best Practice #7: Be Prepared to Intervene**

Beyond the “oops and ouch rule,” at times, instructors must go further to guide student learning when contention arises. A tangential point, a long-winded statement, or a well-intentioned (but patronizing or offensive) response can derail productive classroom dialogue. Repeating or paraphrasing student responses and then reframing, refocusing, or questioning them can maximize shared meaning, strengthening the value of the dialogue. Knowing when to intervene versus letting students talk through soliloquies and tensions is a necessary skill that requires honing and practice. Learning how to intervene when discussions become too heated takes practice, so instructors may want to role-play with other faculty members about difficult classroom discussions to strengthen their dialogue intervention skills

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(Broeckelman-Post & Ruiz-Mesa, 2018). Another option for a conversation that has taken a turn toward the unproductive or when tensions escalate is to draw an “idea parking lot” (Moran & Lenderman, 2017, p. 1) on the board. This visual serves as a physical place where ideas can be “parked,” waiting to be revisited after students have completed readings on a subject or have time to collect their thoughts, cool down, and reflect on the idea or question.

On rare occasions, instructors may sense that nonverbal or verbal communication could spiral into bullying or a physical confrontation between students. If this occurs, instructors must immediately intervene to de-escalate the situation. De-escalation can involve a disruptive communicative practice in the form of a clap, a whistle, or a word that all students would recognize as a pause and reset opportunity. In the case where a situation does not de-escalate, instructors and students should have campus support resource phone numbers easily accessible (e.g., campus counseling, Student Affairs, or campus security).

### **Best Practice #8: Defend Dissident Voices and Perspectives**

Instructors should never let a student be singled out and attacked for unpopular views. If at any point in a class students begin to minimize, malign, or ignore a person or perspective, it may be time for instructors to challenge students to examine dominant experiences in the classroom. Additionally, instructors should watch for groupthink and be ready to intervene if a dominant position emerges that fails to consider alternative possibilities. However abhorrent an idea may seem, instructors should remind students to discuss ideas and positions by focusing on the discourse, not the discussant. Instructors can play devil’s advocate to get the discussion going, and then retreat and gently facilitate the dialogue. It is imperative that instructors undertake critical reflections on their own privilege and perspective as well to recognize and address the power dynamics of the professorial platform. Without such reflection, instructors’ potential experiences of dominant social positions and privileged identities can unwittingly silence or shame students’ views and experiences that differ from their own.

This best practice is one that should be exercised carefully, as defending a dissident voice and perspective is not the same thing as condoning a student’s idea. Instructors should never accept or praise a behavior, idea, or perspective that they believe may harm individuals in the course or could damage the classroom culture or instructor credibility. By clearly reiterating that an idea/perspective is separate from the speaker, instructors and students can passionately disagree with an idea, but people and their individual, lived experiences are not to be minimized or othered. For example, after a speech with a particularly divisive conclusion, an instructor may say to the class: “I’m seeing a lot of strong reactions to the closing statement of this speech. What if we take a minute and unpack this issue?” Alternatively, instructors may use a student speech conclusion as an opportunity to remind students about the importance of audience analysis. Instructors also could remind students to consider how different experiences may shape various perspectives toward a speech conclusion or call to action.

This dialogue technique may require instructors to evoke the class co-created ground rules about being open-minded and respectful of diverse perspectives. Defending minority voices also may necessitate that instructors work through discomfort that may accompany articulating that while a perspective or idea is unpopular and perhaps rooted in a specific ideology, the goal of the discussion is to better understand the course material and one another. This facilitation practice requires empathy, a bit of emotional labor to maintain a calm appearance, flexibility in listening to diverse viewpoints, and the consideration that someone may be a good person, yet be grossly mistaken about a policy, belief, or idea.

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## Best Practice #9: Maintain Instructor Immediacy

Instructor immediacy practices are an important factor in establishing and fortifying a positive classroom climate that can circumvent potential hiccups of facilitating difficult dialogues. Andersen (1979) defined instructor immediacy as “nonverbal behaviors that reduce physical and/or psychological distance between teachers and students” (p. 539) including behaviors such as eye contact, vocal responsiveness, gestures, and smiling at students. Gorham (1988) expanded the construct adding a verbal dimension which includes disclosing appropriate personal examples to demonstrate course concepts, praising student work, using humor, and referring to the course as “our” as opposed to “my class” (p. 43). These verbal and nonverbal immediacy behaviors let students know that their instructors support and appreciate them, which then enhances student learning and communication satisfaction (Myers, Goodboy, & Members of COMM 600, 2014). By self-disclosing information about themselves (e.g., they are a first-generation college graduate, or they come from an immigrant family), instructors demonstrate receptivity by creating memorable moments that connect instructor and student experiences.

Calling students by their preferred names and accurate pronouns (as determined by the student) is a practice of inclusion that can help facilitate productive and meaningful classroom dialogue. One way to encourage immediacy is to empower students by avoiding roll call from official rosters on the first day of class. Instead, instructors can invite students to introduce themselves and identify their preferred name, interests, pronouns, and major. This practice also provides an opportunity to place self-disclosure decisions in the hands of the students (e.g., disclosing accurate pronouns or name changes).

## Best Practice #10: Facilitate Positive Classroom Closure

At the end of each difficult dialogue, instructors can take time to re-emerge from deep discussion and assess the classroom climate, relationships, and purpose. Instructors may consider inviting students to reflect on whether they or a classmate may have felt defensive during the discussion and, if so, why. If needed, instructors should then repair relationships, reestablish ground rules, and reify the purpose of the course. One simple way to do this is for instructors to, when possible, lessen physical and psychological space and say, “Thank you all for a thoughtful discussion today. I know that these conversations can be tough, and I appreciate all of your contributions and honest sharing. Let’s keep up the good work, and I look forward to seeing you all next class.” Another way to reconnect the class is through a reminder of a recent funny moment that occurred in class or an upcoming positive campus event. Instructors can stoke student curiosity about issues and experiences, embrace difference, and support student connectedness by reminding students that they are a community, and that sometimes communities disagree; however, they continue to support one another.

## Conclusion

As educators committed to teaching students about the power of communication, it is imperative that instructors are trained to harness the honest, critical, and sometimes divisive perspectives of students in classroom dialogues. By creating classroom climates that are inclusive of diverse ideas, students and instructors can grapple with complex contemporary issues in ways that support students and reinforce effective oral communication practices. While this is not an exhaustive list of tips and techniques, these 10 best practices for facilitating difficult dialogues provide a foundation for discussing controversial topics in class, and function to produce and maintain a learning environment where all students can feel empowered to engage diverse perspectives, challenge ideas, and preserve classroom relationships.

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